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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: IS KMDR MEDIA REACTION REPORT
SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

¶1. Bush-Sharon Meeting

¶2. Mideast

Key stories in the media:

All media extensively covered the Bush-Sharon Crawford meeting, focusing mainly in the differences between the two positions. Ha'aretz reported that Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and U.S. President George W. Bush remained at odds over the issue of construction in the settlements, and significant differences between the two leaders emerged with regard to their positions on PA Chairman Mahmud Abbas, and the matter of the continuation of the peace process following the disengagement from the Gaza Strip and northern West Bank. Despite the differences, however, the two were full of mutual compliments after the meeting, with Bush noting time and again Sharon's courage in his efforts to promote the pullout plan. "While the United States will not prejudice the outcome of final status negotiations, those changes on the ground, including existing major Israeli population centers, must be taken into account in any final status negotiations," Bush was cited as saying. Yediot headlined that Israel will get a generous U.S. economic aid package aimed for development of the Negev and the Galilee.

Ha'aretz says the Gaza Strip saw a sharp decline in violent incidents yesterday following a number of tense days. Two mortar shells were fired at Gush Katif settlements last night, causing no injuries. Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee's chairman Yuval Steinitz (Likud) called on the Israel Defense Forces to mount a second Defensive Shield operation in the Gaza Strip, commenting that the terror organizations in the Strip were preparing the next round of shelling.

Ha'aretz reported: Yesterday, Hezbollah succeeded for the second time in five months in flying an unmanned surveillance aircraft into Israeli airspace. Israel's Air Force launched fighter planes in response, but they failed to bring down the drone. Two senior IDF officers warned at yesterday's meeting of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense committee that Hezbollah's operations along the Israeli border could lead to a dangerous outbreak of hostilities. Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz confirmed that the IDF has declared a state of alert, and that "we are monitoring events along the northern border."

Maariv reported that Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom is leaving for Egypt today to meet with Egyptian President Mubarak, Chief of Intelligence Omar Suleiman, and Foreign Minister Ahmad Abu-al-Rit. Speaking to 70 visiting mayors from all over the world, Shalom said in Jerusalem yesterday that Egypt is playing a positive role in the Israeli-Palestinian process, trying to make sure that the territories Israel withdraws from remain in PA control and not under Hamas or Islamic Jihad rule.

Yediot Aharonot reported that the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee's legal adviser presented an opinion according to which Sharon will not be able to agree to having Egyptian troops secure Philadelphi Road between the Gaza Strip and Sinai unless the Knesset approves the agreement in a vote. The legal opinion contradicts the prime minister's position. The government reached an agreement with the Egyptian government for 750

Egyptian troops, some of them in armored vehicles and APCs and perhaps even with anti-tank weapons, to be brought to Philadelphi Road. The agreement appears to contravene the peace treaty with Egypt, which ordered the demilitarization of Sinai.

¶1. Bush-Sharon Meeting:

Summary:

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote from Texas in left-leaning, independent Ha'aretz: "The tremendous effort invested in flying the prime minister here, in staging a fabulous photo-op and in tedious preparatory talks by aides, was overshadowed by arguments over construction in the settlements and the way to get the peace process moving after the withdrawal from Gaza and northern Samaria."

Senior diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "[Sharon] left the Lone Star State with a certain sense of aloneness. The difficult task is still before him."

Senior diplomatic correspondent Shimon Shiffer wrote from Texas in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "Sharon's statements at Crawford constitute the first steps in drawing Israel's permanent borders. For the time being he is doing so with the Americans' hesitant consent. One might assume that after another visit or two with Bush, after it becomes evident that perhaps there is no Palestinian partner, the Americans might just come to support Sharon's approach to Israel's future borders."

Washington-based correspondent Nathan Guttman wrote in left-leaning, independent Ha'aretz: "Bush took a big stride toward upping his involvement. He still believes that America cannot afford to get in over its head when it comes to the finer details of the conflict, and is still not enamored with the idea of U.S. mediators in the region. But he is certainly giving his all on a number of fundamental issues of the conflict."

Washington-based correspondent Orly Azulai Katz opined in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "Bush told Sharon clearly: Israel has a partner now, and it must cooperate with it. Unlike Sharon, Bush also believes that after the evacuation of Gaza, trust will be created between the two sides, which will allow continued, persistent political negotiations."

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized: "The problem is that the White House continues to refuse to recognize that the leeway Sharon has taken saved the road map and is a package deal."

Block Quotes:

¶1. "Sharon's Charm Lost Some of Its Luster"

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote from Texas in left-leaning, independent Ha'aretz (April 12): "The tremendous effort invested in flying the prime minister here, in staging a fabulous photo op and in tedious preparatory talks by aides, was overshadowed by arguments over construction in the settlements and the way to get the peace process moving after the withdrawal from Gaza and northern Samaria.... Although he exchanged buddy jokes with Bush, the feeling was that Sharon's charm lost some of its luster during Bush's second term, that things have gone sour, that the bastards changed the rules. Traveling to the ranch, Sharon sounded harsh charges against Abu-Mazen, saying that the resumption of fire would be central in the meeting. Yesterday it seemed the Americans were not enthusiastic with this message.... In a rare interview with NBC, Sharon said that the atmosphere in Israel was "the eve of civil war." Speaking at the press conference, Sharon tried to tone down this remark, but his message was clear: He is unable to make additional gestures or concessions. Still, it seemed neither Sharon nor Bush had much to lose by displaying their disagreement. Sharon can show his rivals in the Likud that he isn't the Americans' yes-man; Bush can show his European and Arab friends that he isn't in Sharon's pocket. From Sharon's standpoint, Bush's most important message perhaps was his expectation 'to work with the prime minister in the years to come.' That's an intriguing signal ahead of the Likud primaries and elections expected in Israel.

¶2. "American Test"
Senior diplomatic correspondent Ben Caspit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv (April 12): "The message inherent in the President's statements [in Texas] was clear and precise: the United States currently is interested in three things: disengagement, disengagement and disengagement. It turns out that the Americans built a special model, a 'Gaza pilot,' in which what is actually a mini-Palestinian state is supposed to be established in the Gaza Strip. The success of this project will have repercussions for the future phases of the process.... If the Gaza project is successful, and if a successful, independent, peace-seeking entity is formed there, even Sharon will be convinced, said Bush, that we can proceed. By saying that he hinted that there was no certainty that the Americans would continue to back Sharon in the future on his insistence that all the security clauses of the road map must be carried out in full. [Sharon] left the Lone Star State with a certain sense of aloneness. The difficult task is still before him."

¶3. "Bush on Disengagement: Gosh, That Sounds Logical"

Senior diplomatic correspondent Shimon Shiffer wrote from Texas in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (April 12): "Sharon emerged from the meeting with Bush in one piece-if we might understate matters. In all the press conferences, the President focused on one issue: sweeping support for disengagement. 'Gosh,' he said repeatedly about the basic premise of Sharon's plan, 'that sounds logical,' said the President.... While Bush did speak about Israel's obligation to refrain from construction in the settlements, he did not respond when Sharon said in his presence that in any future arrangement with the Palestinians the major settlement blocs (including Maale Adumim) will remain in Israeli possession. Sharon's statements at Crawford constitute the first steps in drawing Israel's permanent borders. For the time being he is doing so with the Americans' hesitant consent. One might assume that after another visit or two with Bush, after it becomes evident that perhaps there is no Palestinian partner, the Americans might just come to support Sharon's approach to Israel's future borders."

¶4. "Bush Speaks His Mind"

Washington-based correspondent Nathan Guttman wrote in left-leaning, independent Ha'aretz (April 12): "In his statements yesterday at his ranch in Crawford, Bush took a big stride toward upping his involvement. He still believes that America cannot afford to get in over its head when it comes to the finer details of the conflict, and is still not enamored with the idea of U.S. mediators in the region. But he is certainly giving his all on a number of fundamental issues of the conflict. Bush is no less a friend of Israel after the meeting with Sharon than he was before the joint news conference. He still supports Sharon and the pullout plan, but he made it clear yesterday that this friendship has a limit, and that he won't stand idly by when he hears talk of territorial contiguity between Jerusalem and Ma'aleh Adumim, or that the large settlement blocs will be part of the State of Israel, 'for all that this signifies.'"

¶5. "Smiles and Disagreements"

Washington-based correspondent Orly Azulai Katz opined in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (April 12): "On the eve of the summit people in Israel hoped that the matter of construction in the settlements would be pushed aside in order not to cloud the meeting, which was meant to be festive and supportive. But the subject came up in the meeting and remained controversial.... This was not the only disagreement. Sharon believed that he would be able to present Abu Mazen as the bad boy of the region, the 'rais' [late PA chairman Yasser Arafat] who let them down and was not doing a thing against terrorism. It did not work. Bush told Sharon clearly: Israel has a partner now, and it must cooperate with it. Unlike Sharon, Bush also believes that after the evacuation of Gaza, trust will be created between the two sides, which will allow continued, persistent political negotiations."

¶6. "Sharon Gets the Ranch Treatment"

Conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (April 12): "Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's first visit to US President George W. Bush's ranch was picturesque, as expected, but the diplomatic picture was of two leaders dancing around areas of disagreement.. [Their] statements can be seen as a classic example of agreeing

to disagree, or put in a slightly more positive sense, of constructive ambiguity.. The problem is that the White House continues to refuse to recognize that the leeway Sharon has taken saved the road map and is a package deal. By committing to dismantling settlements long before final-status talks, Sharon went far beyond the road map's obligations. But to do this Sharon must also, he has once again made clear, take leeway in the other direction, namely solidifying Israeli control over the settlement blocs. The continued White House refusal to even tacitly recognize such a bargain creates a tension that is harmful not just to Israel's interests, but to US policy. It does not build US credibility with the Palestinian side; it only serves to distract from the pressure that must be exerted to force Palestinian Authority Chairman Mahmud Abbas to take real steps to dismantle terrorist groups.. The other tension that should be resolved is over how to "help" Abbas. It seems that neither Sharon nor Bush is willing to use the real leverage that the international community has to force Abbas's hand, namely withholding further financial and diplomatic support pending his using the ample forces under his command to take concrete actions. Instead, what we see from the PA leadership is a continuation of the Arafat-style tactics of denying responsibility and claiming weakness."

¶2. Mideast:

Summary:

Veteran print and TV journalist Dan Margalit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv: "The currently practical option ... is to march in the direction of a unilateral arrangement. To withdraw not in order to flee but rather to ameliorate our situation. The decision makers have not yet come to accept that we are marching alone, and that is a shame. Since precious time is being squandered."

Block Quotes:

"Back to the Unilateral Track"

Veteran print and TV journalist Dan Margalit wrote in popular, pluralist Maariv (April 12): "The IDF refrained from responding with fire to the barrage of mortar shells the Palestinians showered on the Gush Katif settlements, and that ..., for the time being, was the wise course of action. And Ariel Sharon voiced his disappointment with Abu Mazen's conduct in his conversation with George Bush, and even that, to a certain extent, was the wise course of action. Okay, but what next? ... Any political planning that is undertaken must take into account the possibility that there will be no Palestinian partner in the foreseeable future. Given these circumstances Sharon is now forced back to square one. He should admit that disengagement is a unilateral step, just like it was in its original guise. The political significance of this is that Sharon will be obliged to implement the disengagement plan with large numbers of opponents to his Right, and with the absence of a supporting flank from the Left, which will abandon him.... Therefore, the currently practical option -- which might engender Palestinian willingness to eradicate terrorism and to negotiate a final status arrangement in the future -- is to march in the direction of a unilateral arrangement. To withdraw not in order to flee but rather to ameliorate our situation. The decision makers have not yet come to accept that we are marching alone, and that is a shame. Since precious time is being squandered."

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